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ABSTRACT

A qualitative study designed to elicit the widest possible range of responses was conducted to determine the attitudes of journalists toward ethics. The study's three questions asked respondents (1) if they encountered ethical decisions in their jobs; (2) if not, why not; and (3) if so, how frequently and in what types of situations. Subjects were 153 employees of 10 newspapers from across the United States, mostly editors and reporters. A few did not feel that they faced ethical decisions at all. Those who did feel they faced ethical decisions were divided into two categories: a large group who listed decisions involving threats to objectivity, and a much smaller group that mentioned decisions involving an extra-professional sense of morality. The objectivity decisions of the first group can be further subdivided into conflicts between objective news coverage and the journalist's personal gain, bias or convenience; conflicts between objective news coverage and the pressures of the job; and human limitations in deciding what is objective. The second group's decisions involved concerns about invasions of privacy and exploitation of sources and concerns about potential harmful effects, in a larger social sense, of the professional norms themselves. Results indicated that journalists see ethics as no more than adherence to a narrow code of professional behavior that is almost always defined in terms of "objectivity." Few cared about larger community issues. This situation is not encouraging. (JL)

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QUALITATIVE STUDIES

NEWSPAPER JOURNALISTS' PERCEPTIONS OF ETHICAL DECISIONS

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Newspaper Journalists' Perceptions of Ethical Decisions

American journalistic ethics are considerably younger and less robust than American journalism. For some time after reporting developed into a separate craft during the Penny Press era, creativity, not a strong moral code, was the supreme virtue in a reporter. Even in its maturity, the Penny Press produced hoaxes on a scale so grand that recent journalistic frauds seem puny by comparison. And, in those less self-conscious days, journalists caught in lapses of honesty reacted not so much with guilt as regret over the anticipated loss in circulation. Even so respected--and relatively recent--a journalist as H. L. Mencken was not immune to the temptations of a good story, true or not. In his autobiography, Mencken describes with relish (and no regret) how he collaborated with another reporter in faking a series of stories while covering Baltimore city hall. A third reporter, whose previous scoops had inspired the fraud, was forced to cave in when his editors demanded to know why he was missing the stories his two competitors had. The three continued to write occasional hoaxes afterwards, and their editors remained happy. 1

Consciously formulated ethics seem to have developed in journalism, as in other occupations, as part of the striving toward professional status. Once conceived, the idea led a vicissitudinary life. As Clifford Christians points out, the twentieth century saw a surge of interest in ethics in

the 1920s, a period of virtual indifference (at least as measured by published works on the subject) for about four decades thereafter, then a resurgence of interest in the last decade.² The uncertain regard which American journalists pay the idea of ethics within their occupation is shown by changes in kind, as well as degree, of interest. In the 1920s, a "non-functional" approach dominated in which passion for righteousness, duty, communal welfare, trust, decency, and honesty of purpose were common exhortations signalling deep connectedness with others.³ But that conception was quickly overtaken by a competing one which saw ethics as "equivalent to an objective, i.e. unbiased, reporting of facts."⁴ True, the merit, even the possibility of objective reporting decayed slowly in the post-World War II era. The "social responsibility" theory of the press offered an alternative model of journalism, and a somewhat broader understanding of ethics accordingly developed in some quarters of the journalistic community. But the dominant ethical concern has remained the avoidance of bias.

At no time have American journalists been universally committed to an ethical code. The Code of Ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists, Sigma Delta Chi, dates to 1926. But the society's success in signing up members hardly approaches that of older occupational groups with claims to professionalism. What is more, even the group's members clearly do not all attend the code. The society's board of directors felt it necessary in 1974, one year after the

adoption of a revised code, to plead with chapters to insist on compliance. Some chapters, the board said in a statement, had themselves violated the code by having "accepted something 'of value' in allowing commercial firms or institutions to underwrite chapter activities such as the mailing of notices or newsletters, providing facilities for meetings or social affairs, cocktail parties, subsidizing award programs, etc."⁵ Furthermore, the board said, some individual members "remain oblivious" to the code. The tentative standing of the revised code among journalists was underlined by the board's caution in dealing with violators. The code, the board concluded,

affects many existing practices, some of them entrenched by years of observation, and chapters should move carefully to correct violations of its spirit. In time, hopefully/sic/, it will be accepted by all as the normal way for journalists to conduct themselves.⁶

If ethics remain an object of hope for some journalists, for others they are an object of derision, or at least a tempting excuse for self-mockery. The chief of a major city bureau of one of the two major American wire services reacted with mock amazement to the suggestion that his bureau participate in a study of media ethics. He could never afford ethics, he said. He said that in his early days with the wire service he would enter a back door or window of a home to steal pictures of traffic accident or crime victims while an accomplice distracted the victim's family at the front of the house. He refused to endorse his

bureau's participation in the study. A reporter for a major metropolitan daily that did take part in the study summed up his regard for ethics research in the following way:

I have lots of rather low-level ethical decisions; most are on the order of whether I am going to throw away this questionnaire after peeling off the stamp on the return envelope.

Procedure

The wide range of attitudes toward ethics was at the center of concern of a group of University of Illinois faculty who designed a qualitative study of media ethics. They wanted a research design which would cast the widest possible net, catching perceptions of the question not limited by the researchers' own (perhaps narrow) categories. The aim, as in most qualitative research, was to let the targets of the research speak for themselves. The researchers would use categorization only after the fact, as an organizing and descriptive tool. An open-ended research questionnaire was accordingly developed and sent to participating firms for distribution to employees. The three questions asked, in their entirety, were:

1. Do you feel that you encounter ethical decisions in the practice of your job?
2. If not, please explain why you feel these types of decisions do not arise in your work.
3. If you do. . .
 - (a) Please indicate how frequently these decisions arise.
 - (b) Please describe, in a paragraph or two, the types of situations in which you typically encounter the most important of these decisions.

The questionnaires were sent to a number of cooperating firms in each subject area (e.g., advertising, film, broadcasting, book publishing). This paper summarizes the responses of 153 employees, mostly editors and reporters, of newspapers across the United States. Ten news organizations were represented in the study:

1. A weekly newspaper of about 3,000 circulation.
2. A daily newspaper of about 20,000 circulation.
3. A daily newspaper of about 30,000 circulation.
4. A daily newspaper of about 50,000 circulation.
5. A prestigious daily newspaper with a nationwide circulation of about 175,000.
6. A morning and afternoon newspaper combination with a total circulation of about 230,000.
7. A daily newspaper of about 420,000 circulation.
8. A daily newspaper of about 675,000 circulation.
9. A daily newspaper of nearly 800,000 circulation.
10. The Washington bureau of a supplemental news service.

Findings

Once the results are in, the beguiling simplicity of the open-ended questionnaire can become a taxonomic torment: How to categorize, let alone describe, the variety of fish caught in so wide a net? Any system of categorization in the human sciences is by nature distorting. In the interests of economy and manageable discussion it tosses into

the same bin human responses which are as individual as the humans from which they came. Yet the author is relatively satisfied with the categories into which the 153 responses in this survey seemed-- after several false starts--to sort themselves. No raw numbers or percentages will be used, however, lest they imply that the study is something which it is not--a quantitatively representative description of various ethical positions. The object of the study was not quantitative representativeness, but a sweep of the range of perceptions. What is offered here, then, is an overview of the dominant kinds of responses. They are buttressed by verbatim excerpts from the questionnaires which seem to the author representative of common themes.

The range was wide not only in the kinds of situations viewed by respondents as having ethical implications, but also in the frequency with which ethical decisions were perceived to occur. Here perhaps is the strongest indication of the enormous variance in perception of what ethics is-- a variance explained probably by the widely noted absence, in the relativist twentieth century, of any universal moral teachings. At one end of the frequency scale, a handful of respondents felt they encountered no ethical decisions in the course of their work. At the other end, a slightly larger handful perceived their jobs to be unending series of ethical decisions. In between, the range was between several times a day and once or twice a year. a respondent who listed the latter, a Washington correspondent for a sup-

plementary news service, made mocking reference to her own sliding ethical scale:

A couple times a year, if I'm feeling exceptionally conscientious, if not out and out self-righteous.

The few "no" responses were given by journalists who clearly view ethics as something touching only on violations of clear-cut norms regarding objectivity and treatment of sources.

It just doesn't occur in the general run of news and features work. (From a reporter for a large metropolitan daily.)

As a general assignment reporter I do not have the kind of daily working relationship with news sources which could conceivably lead to ethical decisions. (A reporter for a medium-sized daily.)

I'm in sports and seldom encounter ethical situations. (Baseball writer for metropolitan daily.)

The religion writer for a metropolitan daily hypothesized that her own (unspecified) moral code and that of her paper shielded her from any ethical decisions:

I am reporting news of religion at a daily newspaper and have not had ethical problems so far, possibly because the community is aware that employees are held to a high standard, and possibly because I personally have high standards.

One of the "no" respondents wound up in that category as the result of taking the objectivity view of ethics to its logical extreme. If, as the respondent assumed, the supreme ethical goal of news work is to present unbiased news, then all ethical decisions have been routinized away:

A reporter's job is to report the news fairly and

accurately. In writing a story, he doesn't ask himself, "Is this right or wrong?" but rather "Am I portraying this accurately?" In deciding what questions to ask and what information to put into a story, he's making professional decisions, not ethical ones. I've seldom been asked to do anything I considered unethical in my work, but I have been asked to do many things I considered stupid. (Reporter, metropolitan daily.)

At the other extreme, some respondents . answered "always," "daily, almost hourly," "constantly," "every day, every article," or something similar--indicating they saw themselves as constantly making ethical decisions in the course of their work. Most of them, interestingly, do not differ from the reporter just quoted as to the goal of journalism--unbiased "facts"-- but they share none of the conviction that the facts are easy to find:

I make such a decision when I decide who to call, who to quote, or whether or not to do a story. (Economics and investigative reporter, metropolitan daily.)

Ethical decisions can arise at every point of the editorial process. In selecting which stories to cover, out of the hundreds of possibilities, each day, it is easy, but possibly unethical, to avoid the touchy subject, the unpopular cause, the hard to develop story. In covering the story, selection of the facts to represent the subject accurately, avoiding making the trivial sound important; not submerging the important; not accepting P.R. as fact; not promoting foolishness to wisdom; not making fun of sincerity. In editing the story, making sure the story is complete, but not overdone; not substituting the editors' ideas for the reporters'. The reporter was there, the editor wasn't. (Editor, Washington bureau, supplementary news service.)

I write editorials that could (I hope) persuade people of the rightness or wrongness of a particular position or action. If being assured of the ethical basis of the matter in question isn't such a decision, I don't know what is. (Editorial

writer, metropolitan daily.)

Responses from those who felt they did face ethical decisions in the course of their work could be divided into two general categories. One group listed those decisions involving threats or possible threats to "objective" coverage of news. The other group mentioned decisions involving violations or potential violations of an extra- professional sense of morality. The latter category had by far the fewer mentions. It appeared on less than a third of the questionnaires of those respondents who said they faced ethical decisions. Many of those respondents also listed "objectivity" decisions as well.

The Ethics of "Objectivity"

The "objectivity" decisions can be further subdivided into three categories. They involve:

(a) conflicts between objective news coverage and the journalist's personal gain, bias, or convenience.

(b) conflicts between objective news coverage and the pressures of the job.

(c) human limitations in deciding what is objective.

The first of these subcategories, although one of the most frequently mentioned, seems to be the least problematic. Respondents almost universally agreed journalists must guard against using their positions to benefit themselves or their causes. But different respondents drew the line at

different places.

Some [ethical questions] are obvious, the matter of free tickets and lunches always being thrown your way, for instance. Sometimes they have nothing to do with a story you are covering. You have to remember they're not being extended to you because you're a wonderful person, it's because of the position you hold. Similarly, people are always asking for favors, for coverage. If they've been helpful to you in the past, there is the temptation to oblige, but one must ask, is this news? (General assignment reporter for metropolitan daily.)

There are two types: 1. Acceptance of gifts, favors, etc., which might influence what one writes. As a general practice, I accept nothing unless it is unavoidable. Such an unavoidable favor, for instance, might be a ride on an oil company helicopter out to an off-shore drilling rig, or a ride on a military aircraft when there is no other way to reach a destination. 2. Situations where I might have a conflict-of-interest. Example: for a while I owned a small amount (100 shares) of Chrysler Corporation stock. At times, Chrysler might be involved in something about which I was writing, such as air-pollution regulations, or a new Army tank. I found this made me uncomfortable, so I sold that stock, and some others, and generally confine myself to investments, such as real estate, or mutual funds, where the likelihood of conflict is minimal. (White House correspondent for nationally circulated daily.)

I'll accept tickets to a baseball game or a play, but more often I pay my own way. I feel it's a bit unethical to phone a press agent and ask for such tickets, but if they're offered, I might take them. I also attend a party maybe once or twice a year that some major corporation gives. But I wouldn't go to a party that a politician gives specifically for the press. I don't even like to have a politician buy me a drink, although I have done so when the situation would have been awkward if I refused. (Rewriteman for metropolitan daily.)

As manager I must consider individual rights, needs, desires of employees against the needs of the newspaper. I.e., do you fire a reporter who's

sleeping with a policeman because it is compromising coverage of the department? (Editor/publisher of small-town daily.)

Early in my career, a politician was buying my lunch. A passerby quipped to him that he was "buying off the press." My host's retort was, "If I can buy him this cheaply, I don't want him." A lot of truth in that and a useful guideline. (Financial writer for metropolitan daily.)

There are several areas in which I've encountered "ethical" types of questions. One has simply to do with biology. I am a woman. As a woman, and as a feminist, there are certain issues of public concern in which I have a vested interest. For example, it can be--and has upon occasion--been quite difficult to conduct "unbiased" interviews with legislators responsible for action on the Equal Rights Amendment. This is particularly true when the responses anti-ERA officials are giving me happen to come entirely from the ultra-conservatives in the right-to-life movement. It is hard for me not to argue back that their logic is distorted by misrepresentations, manipulation, and outright lies. That is not to say that I do not believe there are some legitimate arguments--or questions, rather--that have been raised about the ERA. Because I recognize that "other side," however, but at the same time reject it for my own life, I know that certain ERA stories I have written have been "overly fair"--if that is possible. In other words, I end up promoting the anti-ERA arguments more than they deserve in an effort to negate my own bias on the issue. (Reporter, metropolitan daily.)

The second subcategory of "objectivity" decisions come in two types: (1) those involving the pressures of time and performance which mitigate against accurate and well-balanced news coverage, and (2) the balder pressures from the boss. It is usually clear to journalists pondering such decisions what is the ethical course of action--but quite often, they confess, they don't follow it.

Ethics are bendable, depending on the competitiveness of the media. You do what you have to, to remain competitive. Pressure for hard competitive leads on stories (from superiors) occasionally forces one to exaggerate, sensationalize, if you will, certain stories. It's difficult to resist. That happens perhaps once a month or less. But it does happen. Resisting compromising personal ethics is tough but it can be done. There is no question on off-the-record or background-only decisions. You protect your source. Unless you are being used by the source. Even then you generally don't use the material rather than face the decision of burning the source.
(Aviation/maritime/transportation writer, metropolitan daily.)

Now and then it's discovered that a service column entailing letters from the public will contain fabricated letters--items made up by an employee under pressure to produce. If there aren't enough letters to the column to support the feature, why fool the public into thinking we're providing a public service? Curbs against this practice have to be reinforced now and then. (Editor of Week-ender section for metropolitan daily.)

Should we take, or use pictures from demonstrations that are taking place for the benefit of the cameras and would not happen if the cameras left? Covering demonstrations, should we ask marchers with signs to walk where the light is better, or where we can have a better background, or should we keep our hands off? (Photographer, metropolitan daily.)

It is always difficult to generalize, but in almost any interview situation under deadline pressure there is the temptation to take shortcuts and make assumptions. Often these fit a preconceived bias and as often as not I'll recognize the pattern and make a judgment on how to handle it based on experience, gut reaction, worth of the information, potential risk and other factors that are loosely captioned under news sense or professionalism. I prefer to call it knowing the limits of your craft. Keep in mind that ethics are formed in large measure by what one's colleagues and editors will tolerate; what the commonly accepted practices are and what the likely competition from the other news gathering organizations will be.
(General assignment reporter, metropolitan daily.)

metropolitan daily.)

Most common: temptation to hype a story, to obtain better use of the story. This can be at the expense of truth, a person or situation described in the story, or the readers. It is often easy to over-state a story through choice of words, down-playing of the other side, etc., while sticking to wording that can be defended as literally correct. (Washington correspondent for metropolitan daily.)

Covering a specific field, you sometimes find yourself doubting whether to criticize people who might be "helping" you later on with information you might need to do a better job. (Sports writer, metropolitan daily.)

[T]he biggest ethical nightmares are these: (1) Having to cover downtown development stories in which the president of _____ Newspapers is a key figure and major news source. (2) Having to cover casino gambling stories at a time when the [newspaper] has editorially opposed a proposal to legalize casinos and when [the newspaper] and top management officials have contributed \$35,000 to the anti-casino campaign fund. (Reporter, metropolitan daily.)

Those respondents who indicated how conflicts with management were resolved inevitably said management won. The boss is, however regrettably, still the boss:

A story unjustified by any news or entertainment value, to be run for the benefit of your editor, publisher, the paper's candidate or "favorite" in any field, or a hatchet job on the enemy. Most of these matters are quite trivial, and if you can't learn to suspend your conscience occasionally, you can't work in this business. Media ethics apply when they don't cost anything. (Reporter/rewriteman, metropolitan daily.)

I know that I am flcoded with Israeli propaganda daily--and use some I suppose in the opinion sections of the paper. There is no Arab balance. A person writing for our perspective section is a former big time newspaperman, who is now retired and also works part time for an Arab state. It's not a confrontation state, but should he be writ-

ing for us at all about the Middle East? The editor says yes, so I bow to another daily ethical question--my wife and I like to eat. (Associate editor, metropolitan daily.)

Responses in the third "objectivity" category--those involving uncertainties of deciding what constitutes objectivity--betrayed perhaps the most frustration in deciding how to behave ethically. Offers of free trips or Christmas presents on the one hand and the boss's prejudices on the other are at least identifiable (if not necessarily vanquishable) demons. But how to deal with one's own ineffable frailties of judgment?

In writing a piece that goes beyond routine daily coverage, I'm often confronted with a decision about how to add up the facts. The dilemma is, can you go with a story that's completely supported by the facts, if there's another interpretation that also fits the facts? (Investigative reporter, metropolitan daily.)

In every story, the effort to get it right involves an ethical decision: to be fair, to be sensitive. I find these considerations enter into almost every story I do--particularly those reflecting on some individual or group. These feelings arise internally. (Reporter, metropolitan daily.)

If someone calls who wants a story, he gets it. The person who doesn't call, doesn't get a story. The suicide who jumps from the 13th floor of a building gets pix if cameraman happens to be there, if not, it goes obit page. (Editor, medium-sized daily.)

Often, the simple act of deciding what's news--what's the lead of your story--means making an ethical decision. (Reporter, metropolitan daily.)

Do you show a room of people listening half full or half empty? The angle of the picture can in-

fluence the way people think. the camera can't lie but the photographer can. (Chief photographer, medium-sized daily.)

Category Two: News That Hurts

While the dominant motif of most responses was a concern for a tough professional code of ethics--how to best assure "objective" news coverage--a significant minority of responses was concerned with potential violations of broader moral conceptions. The vast majority of these might in one sense also be considered aspects of objective news coverage. They dealt with violations of "proper" professional behavior, a concept linked to the idea of the objective professional. In this first subcategory fall concerns about invasion of privacy and exploitation of sources.

When there is a conflict between the pursuit of news and consideration for the feelings of sources or subjects, which should the journalist choose? Most of the respondents listing that conflict as among their ethical decisions gave no clearcut answer. Those few who did, perhaps significantly, came down in favor of the news--often with the argument that the "public right to know" is more important than individual feelings.

Reporting daily--do you use a source's name when he or she asks for anonymity? A man is a divorce expert-- he seems to have an abnormal hate for women--is this relevant to the story? Is the fact that he's divorced relevant? Is his homosexuality relevant? A particular divorce case makes a good illustration for a feature on child custody. Though the information is all public record,

should I use the real names? Should I use the child's name? Is the authenticity worth the grief it will cause the individuals to see it in print? Sometimes yes, sometimes no. (Feature writer, metropolitan daily.)

Stories involving youngsters under 17 who have been accused of a crime or crimes are a common source of agonizing decisions. What crimes are serious enough to merit use of names of the accused? How much detail in the story? What is our obligation to the youth and his family? What is our obligation to the community in terms of the alleged salutary effect on the crime rate from identifying those charged? What is our obligation to our readers? (Editor, medium-sized daily.)

whether to pass up a story which might normally be considered legitimate news but could inflame community or harm a part of it. . . (Assistant editor, national news, nationally circulated daily.)

I would broadly define ethical decisions as those that can hurt someone else. Do you print the name of a rape victim, do you deliberately overwrite or overplay a story in order to sell papers in a competitive market? Do you shield a source or blow his cover? A reporter has to guard against letting the cavalier arrogance creep into his work that leads him to believe he has license to print anything at all in the interest of Free Press. On the other hand, you sometimes find yourself faced with the prospect of harming a friend or an admired institution. How to decide? I'd be lying to say I know. You just sweat it out. Remember how you'd like to be treated if the situation were reversed; yet, never forget who pays your check and why. (Financial columnist, metropolitan daily.)

Although no decision is of paramount importance--that decision, "Print or not to print" is always resolved in the positive--the most frequent important ethical decision is conning a reluctant source into giving information. (Reporter, metropolitan daily.)

Invasion of privacy is probably the toughest situation. Do you take the picture showing a grieving widow? Homeless family? Injured auto driver? I believe we must since our job is to inform the

public. However, I also feel there are proper ways to handle these assignments without causing undue harm to individual privacy. (Chief photographer, medium-sized daily.)

Responses in the second subcategory, only 15 in all, were concerned with the potential harmful effects, in a larger social sense, of the professional norms themselves. These respondents seemed to view ethics in the more traditional absolutist sense: How is one to conduct one's life? For them, a professional code did not offer an easy way out. To the contrary, it often lay at the center of the problem, since these respondents were not convinced that the code should shield them from more far-reaching ethical dilemmas. They were troubled by conflicts between the norms of their occupation and their allegiance to some other, larger sense of morality. Here were the investigative reporters wondering about the ethics of breaking the law to protect the law. Here were those journalists who were not sure that freedom of the press is always the supreme value.

Practically speaking one problem is the conflict between serving the truth and serving the public interest; sometimes it may not always be beneficial in the long run for the public to know all the details of a decision, event, etc. (Medical writer, metropolitan daily.)

whether to run legitimate stories that could lead to racial, campus, or other disturbances. Or in other words, do we report the news or try to "play God" and censor ourselves? (Reporter, medium-sized daily.)

Most common in my area is the use of stolen documents, or at least the use of information leaked in defiance of law, regulation or prior promise. If, for example, federal privacy laws were not

routinely broken by law enforcement officers, there would be very little information about a crime or criminal activity until after all involved had been accused, indicted, tried and convicted. Investigative stories almost always begin with restricted information. Another common situation is that of the possibility of prejudicial publicity arising from stories reporting a crime. Also, we often find ourselves defending the First Amendment to the exclusion of all other rights, though many rights do, in fact, conflict. (Investigative reporter, metropolitan daily.)

We sent a reporter into Mexico to pose as an illegal alien, following other, legitimate aliens into the United States and to get a job as an alien.

Question: What are the ethical ramifications of the reporter paying a "Coyote" to bring him across the border--illegal in Mexico and the United States?

Questions of ethics and safety in the very act of crossing the border--our reporter witnessed a murder.

Questions of false identification used to get a job as an alien.

Almost daily we question the use of unidentified sources and stolen or "accidentally" purloined documents. (Editor, metropolitan daily.)

Recently, when I was working on some investigative pieces about problems within the federal government's CETA (Comprehensive Employment and Training) program, I began to feel guilty because most persons who benefit from CETA are from minority groups. The stories reflected badly on CETA, and consequently upon persons involved in the program, i.e., minority groups. I decided, however, that the stories should be written anyway. (Reporter, metropolitan daily.)

We conspire with the rest of the racist society, or perhaps are kingpins, in inculcating into the minds of non-whites a limited, biased and subsequently negative and self-depressing view of themselves and of the world. We play up black-against white crimes, it seems, more than any other criminal matchup. We give the black religious community scant recognition and coverage. We refuse to give our black writers equal respect and opportunity from the assignment and copy-editing and publishing standpoints. (Copyeditor/sports writer, metropolitan daily.)

In this category appeared the single reference, in 153 responses, to a formal system of ethics outside the profession--Christianity. Here, too, are the only two expressions of concern about the welfare of communities as well as newspapers. Those two responses come from journalists who must face other members of their cities constantly in their daily lives; one is the publisher of a weekly in a town of about 5,000 people, the other the publisher of a daily in a city of about 30,000.

As community leader (by virtue of being president of the town's oldest, and one of its largest, businesses) I must consider long range social and economic welfare of the community along with the necessity to print news which may have short range bad effect on community.

As an alleged Christian I have to square honest reporting with the damage it does daily to some individuals, i.e., the story of the drunk-driving father which shames his children at school, humiliates his wife, puts family income in jeopardy. (Editor and publisher of small-town daily.)

The most difficult. . . I suppose, is to publish news stories that have a potential effect of damaging an overall project that would be worthwhile and in the best interests of the community.

In a small community there is the ever present conflict of publishing uncomplimentary things about advertisers and friends. This would include at times a subtle (sometimes not so subtle) pressure from friends and advertisers who are members of government agencies and boards. (Editor, small-town weekly.)

And, finally, a reporter for a metropolitan daily said he made an ethical decision "every morning when I put on my

discovering) any personal moral criteria. A reporter offered the following response:

I have a rule about refusing freebies, anything from coffee to trips.

Grander questions about what I write are not "ethical" judgments as much as personal news judgment, which I'm not prepared to discuss in two graphs.

Such a professionalized sense of ethics can appear to the outsider to be not so much ethics as a convenient moral shield. Gaye Tuchman, among others, argues that "objective" news coverage offers an excellent excuse for deflecting questions about journalistic practices which have the potential of harming individuals and society. One might argue that this is solid utilitarian ethics--the greatest good for the greatest number. But "the public's right to know" can also be a tempting rationalization for the reporter who wants to get a story into print for the more tawdry reasons of ego gratification and peer recognition.

I have travelled frequently with professional athletes. Their road habits frequently involve infidelity, to such a degree in some cases it could actually affect their play. Whether or how to report this--and whether there is concrete evidence of affecting the play-- is a question. The only crucial matter to my readers, to my paper, to myself, is whether it affects play; otherwise, there would be no reason to reveal truths which would do nothing but hurt the athlete. It is not for me to judge a man's moral code unless it is negatively affecting others in such a way as to beg for public exposure. (Sports writer, metropolitan daily.)

Dealing with private lives, as a columnist does, it's important to distinguish between "privacy" and "the public's right to know." This often is a hairline decision. I most often opt for the public. (Columnist, metropolitan daily.)

pants."

The problem is whether or not to continue being a part of newspapering in which the trend is to report less significant news and more keeping up with fads, entertainment trends, personalities and keeping [rich people] informed on the best shops, restaurants, and other toys of the single, navel-gazing Sybarite set.

Discussion

For the vast majority of respondents in the survey, ethics were viewed as questions of adherence to a rather narrowly defined code of professional behavior. For most, it is not an exaggeration to say that ethics equated with "objective" news coverage. Thus the architecture critic for a metropolitan daily, in response to the questionnaire's request for a description of the respondent's most important ethical decisions, offered what amounted to his personal code of ethical behavior, all of which was aimed at the avoidance of appearing to be biased:

I turn down all freeloards.
I turn down free junkets,
transportation, etc..

I join no organization which I might some day have to criticize in print.

I do not form close social relationships with persons I might some day have to criticize in print.

I decline offers to serve on design competition juries.

I pick up a lot of checks and put them on my expense account so "they" can't put them on theirs.

To the extent that ethical concerns remain, they can often be transmuted into questions of "professional judgment," apparently relieving the journalist of exercising (or

Is it ethical to try to trick a hostile story subject into thinking you know more than you do? Is it ethical to bluff? I generally resolve such ethical questions by appealing to the higher law: the reader's right to know. (Investigative reporter, metropolitan daily.)

Most typically, it's a matter of an individual's right to privacy coming up against the public's right to know. We take that particular dilemma as part-and-parcel of being in the newspaper business and almost always go right ahead and pry and publish. (Reporter, metropolitan daily.)

Jacques Ellul despairs for the individual's ability to make moral decisions in a world in which everything, including human relationships, is rationalized by "la technique."

The tendency for journalists to equate ethics with "objectivity," a professional norm, may fit in with Ellul's dismal analysis. Far from acting as counterbalance to the drive toward making all human behavior answerable only to the criterion of efficiency, this kind of ethics is itself technicized. Indeed, for some workers, the assumption that ethical decisions should be routinized caused some annoyance when they were not.

Working on the copy desk, I'm generally limited to those types of "ethical decisions" which should already have been resolved by other desks, but sometimes are not. (Copyeditor, metropolitan daily.)

Although many respondents indicated some genuine discomfort over ethical problems they feel they have within the narrow parameters of the professional code of objective news coverage, very few indicated concerns about--or even awareness of--ethical dilemmas beyond those parameters. A

sizable minority of respondents exhibited concern that aggressive pursuit of "objective" news might exploit individuals. But in all cases where the respondent suggested which choice should be made, protection of the individual or publication of an important story, the choice was for the story.

Only a small handful of the 153 respondents suggested that objective news coverage might not always be an absolute value. It is probably significant that the two who spoke most clearly about their doubts on this score were small-town newspaper publishers, both of whom had been in place for a number of years. By virtue of their daily face-to-face contact with their sources and readers and their personal involvement in community issues, they are forced to operate toward other people with something other than functional ethics. Friends, neighbors, and family cannot simply be treated as elements to be used in pursuit of the professional norm of objective news coverage.

For those who would like to see all journalists develop a similar sense of community with all humans--not just with those who share their occupation--little solid hope can be offered. The trend in modern industrial states is toward more professionalization, not less. And it may be that the professionalization which many journalists have for years seen as the road to higher ethical standards will lead to more insular attitudes towards those outside the profession. It will almost surely lead to a further loosening of the al-

ready tenuous bonds which have traditionally held all humans together in mutual concern.

Further, professionalization further institutionalizes, without examination, the very concept which at least some critics think has profound anti-ethical consequences: the idea that "objective" news coverage remains the best the media can do in helping humankind sort itself through a very difficult time. James W. Carey writes:

What are lamely called the conventions of objective reporting were developed to report another century and another society. They were designed to report a secure world. . . about which there was a rather broad consensus, . . . a settled mode of life . . . which could be rendered in the straightforward "who says what to whom" manner. . . Today no accepted system of interpretation exists and political values and purposes are very much in contention . . . and cannot be encased within traditional forms of understanding. Consequently, "objective reporting" does little more than convey this disorder in isolated fragmented news stories.⁷

Perhaps there should be little rejoicing over the trend toward stricter personal and institutional standards for journalists--a trend noted by some of the respondents in this survey. Will journalists be so busy wrestling their sources for the check, and so complacent in their professional virtue when they win, that they never contemplate their profound ethical obligations to the community at large?

NOTES

1. Newspaper Days (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941), pp. 264-266.
2. Clifford G. Christians, "Fifty Years of Scholarship in Media Ethics," Journal of Communication, 27:4 (Autumn, 1977). p. 19.
3. Ibid., pp. 20-21.
4. Ibid., p. 21.
5. National Ethics Committee, Society of Professional Journalists, Sigma Delta Chi, Journalism Ethics Report (undated pamphlet), p. 19.
6. Ibid.
7. "The Communications Revolution and the Professional Communicator," Sociological Review Monographs, January, 1969, p. 35.